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Ecology and Social Movements

Gail Omvedt

IT has become fashionable in India among established Marxists of the big communist parties to characterise ecology movements as 'petty bourgeois'. This kind of stamping has also been done in Europe and North America. But the conception is wrong. Ecology movements from the beginning have had their social base in peasant or farming communities and among tribal peoples. Even in the 'advanced' capitalist countries it has not been middle class vacationers longing for nice scenery but the people who live in the mountains and forests and whose whole materially-based cultural tradition gives them a living relation to the land who have fought the hardest, from German and French farmers opposing nuclear power to American Indians who have fought the devastation of their reservation lands. Middle class intellectuals, joining these movements, have helped to articulate their ideologies, though sometimes giving them a reformist and anti-socialist direction. Factory workers, alienated from the land as from all means of production, have been slower to move on these issues—partly also from being under the leadership of unions and parties who are almost invariably more economistic than the workers themselves—but as they begin fighting on issues of health and safety on the job and against the total degradation of their own urban environment, their linkage with the ecology-oriented movements gives these a new thrust. This sequence can be seen both in Europe and North America and in the thrid world, though it may take very different forms—from the emergence of the Green Party as the first viable radical socialist party in West Germany to the Philippines where tribal resistance to the destruction of their lands is now taking the form of armed struggle led by the New People's Army against a World Bank-financed dam in Luzon.

In India, the final shape of movements on ecology and environmental issues and the nature of the leadership emerging remains to be seen. But here also it is clear that these are most strongly based among peasants and adivasis, and that their fight for livelihood on the issues of forests, famine and fishing not only confronts the state and imperialist penetration, but also raises new issues about the nature of economic development itself and the very meaning of socialism.

Forests for People or Profit?

The most well known of ecology movements is undoubtedly the Chipko movement. From 1973 its base has been among the low caste Himalayan peasantry and especially the women—for these have been the closest to the forests, the gatherers of fodder, fuel and water, while men have often been away seeking jobs in the plains or getting minor rake-offs from the commercialisation of 'development'. But the wider connections of its Gandhian leadership, have helped to make its principles, like those of the '5 Fs' (food, fodder, fuel, fertiliser and fibre), quite widely known.

The Gandhism of the leaders is undoubtedly related to a certain element of reformism. It can be seen in Sunderlal Bahuguna's tendency to see the state as good and only the local forest officials as the enemy, a tendency also reflected in the recent effort of Sarvodaya leader Baba Amte to take up a *jungle bachao* movement in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra; in this case not only Amte's personal appeals to Indira Gandhi but even more his unwillingness to work with local tribal leaders or CPI(ML) activists in the area has resulted in the movement fading out. It does not mean that the *movement* as such is a reformist movement. There is a radicalising process involved in fighting on these issues. Most recently this seems to be expressed in the emergence of the Uttarkhand Sangarsh Vahini (USV) as a new element in the Chipko movement, a militant youth section moving towards a synthesis of Gandhism and Marxism. The Vahini-led anti-alcohol movement has recently become famous, but the main thrust of its efforts is to link together issues—mining, tree-cutting, alcoholism—as related to a single process of exploitation which destroys both the environment and the cultural traditions of the people. "It is the relationship among human beings which determines the relationship between humans and the forests"—that is the theme of Vahini activists. They are also firmly opposed to the leadership principle, that is to movement bureaucracy, a feature which links them to the ecology and feminist movements in the west in contrast to traditional Gandhism in India.

In any event, the class struggle orientation of the USV is not in contradiction with but rather helps confirm the basic themes of the Chipko movement: that control over forests should rest not with the state but with the local community, which is more capable of responsible management; that scientists and experts, who upto now have mainly legitimised the state's decisions as 'scientific forestry' while the real ecology issues have been raised by peoples' movements, should learn to serve the people; that an alternative form of development must be sought, which unlike the destructive rule of the market is based on technology which allows for ecological harmony and local self-reliance.

The Red and Green Flag

Most forest dwellers and tribal peasants in India do not have a surplus of intellectual leadership to articulate their principles. Their own educated sections have tended to become co-opted and brahmanised, while outside left leadership very often tells the local people their problems rather than asks them. However there are striking similarities between these Chipko themes and some of the issues raised in practice by the other famous forest movement in India.

This is of course the Jharkhand movement. Its biggest radical organisation, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, was founded in 1973, about the same time as Chikpo started, but the demand for a separate province within the Indian union goes back to the 1930s (and the tradition of tribal and peasant resistance, of course, much farther than that, in both areas) when it was first raised by educated adivasis. The reasoning is simple: stopping the ongoing drain of resources from the Jharkhand area, which continues to provide steel, and valuable minerals for all-India use and for export, while its factories and mines are only enclaves totally controlled by outsiders and the local people *remain* impoverished and subject to goondaism and extreme forms of economic and social-sexual exploitation.

There has been little scope in this tumultous area for a tradition of Gandhian non-violence, and with the emergence of new struggles in the late 1960s and the birth of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha tribal militancy and police repression reached greater heights than in the Chipko area. In contrast to satyagrahas the movement has been characterised by militant rallies, direct action and from the other side, goondaism and police firing. Issues have also ranged from opposition to moneylending and alcoholism to fighting exploitative dam and development projects which only threatened to deprive the people of more land and forests. In 1978-79 a campaign was undertaken against a World Bank-sponsored 'social forestry' project, in which the adivasis cut down teak trees which had been planted at the expense of the sal tree, centre of their economic and cultural life. Here as well militant clashes with the police occurred, and much of the resulting 'jungle khatao' movement climaxed in the brutal firing and repression in Singhbhum in 1980

What does tree-cutting have to do with tree-hugging? The same issue of local human needs *versus* commercial needs underlies it. The 'social forestry' of the Indian government and international agencies involves the planting of commercial trees like eucalyptus and teak, which provide only lumber and profits for rich farmers (eucalyptus in fact sucks up excessive water from the land, according to most peasants), while local people prefer mixed forests and trees whose leaves, roots, bark, fruit and nuts may be as useful to them as the lumber itself. 'Teak is Bihar, sal is Jharkhand', say the adivasis. Their trees are for profit, ours are for people. And their campaign resulted in, for the first time, a World Bank project being called

to a halt.

The political articulation of the Jharkhand movement is significant. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha was born with a green and red flag, and with the concrete practice of the alliance that this symbolised—Dhanbad mine workers, lower caste peasants, adivasis. 'Lalkhand-Jharkhand' was the slogan of early marches. But the Congress(I), while on one hand collaborating with the ferocious repression of the state, has also sought to chip away at the alliance, wooing the middle-class section of adivasis with the theme of 'only green' and stigmatising the red flag as that of outsiders. Their game has been immensely helped by the economistic tendency (and the predominantly outside leadership) of the CPI and CPI(M) and especially by the CPI(M)'s ongoing opposition to the movement. The CPI(M)'s propaganda lumps together Khalistan, Kolhan, Jharkhand, the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, and the Assam movement as all 'splittist' and 'separatist' and calls instead for 'pure' class struggle. Which means in practice struggle for wages, and expansion of the party. This rhetorical posing of the 'pure red flag' in fact drives people away from it, for it is extremely difficult for adivasis, dalits, women or other sections of toilers to understand that Marxism might be some thing other than what the most powerful Marxists around them say it is. And they have been saying for a very long time that Marxism means class struggle only—in a narrow sense that excludes the issues of national, sexual and other forms of oppression. So, in spite of the fact that ML groups have supported the Jharkhand movement, that the CPI has wavered, and that a section of the ex-ML's has worked in it to develop a theory of Jharkhandi nationality, it has been hard for the adivasis to resist the propaganda that the red flag is the flag of the outsiders, the Dikus. With some of the leadership won over to a Congress(I) position, the conference of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in 1983 decided to adopt only a green flag. But the red-green flag lives on in the area, as the flag of the Singhbum contract labourers' struggle, of many Dhanbad coal miners of the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha and now of the textile workers in Rajnandgaon, the flag of unity and struggle.

Dams and Development

Opposition to dams itself raises crucial issues about the form of capitalist development in India. Major river valley control projects, along with high yielding seeds and fertiliser and provision of bank capital have been central to efforts to create capitalist agricultural development. But, while big dam projects have certainly provided electricity and have helped raise India's irrigated area from 18 per cent to about 30 per cent, they have often resulted in localised problems of waterlogging and salination, they have failed in significant cases at flood control (southwest Bengal has been plagued with floods for several years in spite of the much heralded Damodar Valley project) and they have often intensified uneven development since surrounding dry areas remain untouched.

A good example is south Maharashtra state. Here in the apparently lush irrigated river valleys of Satara, Sangli and Kolhapur districts, sugarcane and other cash crops have provided a base for one of the most power sections of kulak farmers in India, using their control over 'co-operative' sugar factories and other institutions of development to accumulate political power as well as capital. The factory controlled by Chief Minister Vasantdada Patil, for instance, is said to be the largest in Asia with 7,500 ton/day crushing capacity. But even in the central areas, thousands of acres are being lost to waterlogging, while crop productivity is falling—sugarcane yields, for instance which used to be 60 to 80 tons per acre in some parts, have been sinking to 30 to 40 tons. And the dry talukas of the same districts, especially in Satara and Sangli, have become steadily worse off, with steadily declining rainfall due partly to the near complete deforestation of the coastal Sahyadris. 'Development' itself seems to be systematically unequal, since in the last two years—in spite of governmental proclamations of spreading the benefits of development—new cane-crushing tonnage licensed for the factories in the 'advanced' areas is more than that licensed for new factories in the backward areas. Local activists of the backward talukas have even argued that this is a deliberate conspiracy, motivated by the interests of the kulaks and capitalists in keeping large areas as labour reserves. In fact, while some areas are providing the lakhs of migrant sugarcane harvest workers, the drought-ridden talukas of the southern Maharashtra region are the main source of the workers in the Bombay textile industry, whose real wages and living standards have risen little in the hundred years of this industry.

These interlinked dry/irrigated regions of agricultural capitalism have been much more difficult to organise than the tribal or Himalayan peasantry. Caste divisions are much

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more acute, and the existence of a single large community whose traditions are also traditions of resistance is lacking. The division between agricultural labourers and the toiling middle peasantry is also a serious one, and the local ruling classes are both strong and shrewd enough to utilise these caste and class splits. Nor is ecology an immediately visible issue; here the forests have been long gone, and 'development' seems the only way out. Thus the sporadic left-led struggles of agicultural labourers and peasants have generally implicitly accepted the capitalist developmental framework. Every major dam project in India has been accompanied by peasant struggles, but these have nearly all focused on issues of 'rehabilitation', i e, demand for fair resettlement. They have not questioned the nature of the projects. Similarly, famine and drought conditions have led to massive struggles of the rural poor, especially in Maharashtra, but these have focused on demanding government relief works (EGS projects) and other forms of immediate famine relief. Up until fairly recently, the entire Marxist left has looked on development primarily as a distributional issue. The critique has been: there has not been enough of it (the 'bourgeois-landlord state' or the 'semi-feudal state' cannot provide *real* capitalist development), its benefits do not go to the toiling people ('capitalist development is like that').

This includes the writer of this article; and if some 'petty bourgeois' intellectuals and activists have begun to change in the last few years, the impetus for all of us has come from outside, from the movements of the people themselves.

A new trend can be seen in the last few years. While forest area tribal peasants are moving towards struggles to oppose big dam construction entirely, the rural poor in parts of Sangli district and elsewhere have begun to demand that EGS projects should be not simply make-work road-building, but should focus on small irrigation projects that will help the land. Unlike big dams, such small bunding and percolation tanks are much more susceptible to local control and planning. Such a demand also unites the interest of the landless and very poor peasants on the projects with the majority of peasants in the area.

These struggles in part grew out of the textile workers' strike of 1982-83. Workers, returning to their villages, often went on the EGS schemes as a way of supporting themselves, and took part in organising struggles. Their rural strike/struggles helped them understand the connection between the textile owners, state, and Congress(I)-based rural kulaks. They also laid a basis for seeing something of the inherently unequal nature of capitalist development, the connections between rural wealth, rural poverty and factory-level exploitation. In fact, textile workers have always been less 'economistic' than their unions in the sense that they have always been concerned about the 'development' of their villages; only previously this was reformist and linked to Congress(I) village leadership. Now it began to be linked to struggles for a different kind of development. In Khanapur, the most perennially drought-ridden area of Sangli district in the last decades, textile workers led the formation of a rural labourer-peasants' organisation, the Shoshit Shetkari, Kashtakari, Kamgar Mukti Sangarsh (Mukti Sangarsh for short), which took up the leadership of rural struggles.

On July 30, after only eight inches of rain during the entire monsoon resulted in failures of several crops, over 5,000 peasants and labourers organised by Mukti Sangarsh brought their bullocks and cows onto the road, demanding that the police either arrest them along with all the animals, or else provide free fodder and a long-term scientific alternative to drought conditions. The free fodder was won, but as it is apparent that the bourgeois state has no real answer to uneven development and drought, Mukti Sangarsh has gone ahead with its own plans for a 10-day 'science fair' in which activists of the Peoples' Science Movement (PSM) will join local peasants and labourers, students and teachers in exhibitions and programmes dealing with water, health and superstition—with the hope of eventually developing an alternative "peoples' plan" for the entire district.

In this way PSM, which in the four-five years of its existence has gotten involved in numerous rural tours, anti-superstition campaigns, and poster exhibits on issues ranging from women's health to Hiroshima Day, is getting linked to rural struggles. In the process, they are not simply providing some needed skills and resources, but also learning from the people. In an initial Khanapur meeting it was older peasants who argued vigorously that in the days of their childhood there had been abundant rainfall and extensive forests, and the younger scientists who were sceptical. Government records, in fact, show that droughts in areas like Khanapur have been on the increase in the twentieth century.

It seems that the 'natural' and therefore inevitable character of droughts and floods has become as much a part of bourgeois ideology, at least relating to the third world, as it presumably was of pre-capitalist modes in which people were supposed to have stood helpless before natural onslaughts. However, historical research confirms that the irrigation and development projects of the colonial period were accompanied from the beginning not only by inherent problems of waterlogging and salination, but also by disruption of the environment and increased incidence of malaria. In the post-colonial period also big dam projects have often meant destruction of local cultures, increased disease problems, and even occasional failures in the irrigation which they promised. As for rainfall, it is undoubtedly a natural fact that some regions have less and others more, that periods of floods and aridity have been constant phenomena. This does not by itself mean drought, famine, and destructive flash floods. A recent book by the Allchins, two of the most reputed archeologists of South Asia, notes, "The impression of rapidly increasing aridity at the present time, frequently referred to in the current literature, is considered by more informed sources and authority on climate and agriculture to be due to human activity"—and they go on to discuss the theory that 'over-exploitation' of the environment, more than attacks by invading Aryans, was responsible for the collapse of the Harappan civilisation. The assault on the environment which began with the advent at class society five thousand years ago is today being pushed to its limits by capital, with the danger of even graver consequences.

Today, the balance of nature can only be achieved by a conscious balancing of human society and nature—something that requires a revolutionary movement. The taking up of environmental issues requires the coming together of intellectuals who have the resources of scientific training and access to knowledge with the rural toilers and tribals fighting for the lands and forests so much a part of their lives—as well as the working class with its still untapped ability to transform the world. It also has the potential of uniting these sections. It can bring together the two great exploited classes of the rural areas, agricultural labourers and toiling peasants. It can also unite the urban working class, as they become conscious of the link of their increasingly devastated urban environment and the ongoing oppression of their kin elsewhere with the whole system of capitalist exploitation. It is perhaps not accidental that some of the most ecologically conscious revolutionary poetry in the US today is coming from black writers, whose identity stretches from the completely proletarianised black working class of city slums to the revolutionaries of rural Africa—such as Jayne Cortez, who can almost never write a poem without a call to resistance, who describes "the lifeblood of the earth almost dead in the greedy mouth of imperialism", and depicts the graphic wreckages of disease and pollution but ends with a simple vision,

To breath clean air
to drink pure water to plant new crops
to soak up the rain to wash off the stink
to hold body and soul together in peace
That's it
Push back the catastrophes.

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